

# **TOWARD EQUITABLE PUBLIC BUDGETS:**

## **Lessons from the ARPA Experience in Washington**



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Institute on Race, Power  
and Political Economy

**INATAI**

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## COVER IMAGE

Community members organizing mutual aid during the organization's Pasifika Kirisimasi event in December 2020.

**Photo credit:** Pacific Islander Community Association of Washington

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# FOREWARD

**"G**overnment fully invests in our success" is a desire that community organizations and leaders from every corner of Washington have shared with me as I have traveled across this state multiple times over. It is in service to those leaders, organizations and the public employees who work hard every day to advance equity that we publish this report, a report that was requested by Inatai grantees to further their work, advance their missions, and ensure that public resources are utilized in fair and transparent ways that truly benefit all of Washington. Inatai Foundation's mission is to transform the balance of power to ensure equity and racial justice across Washington state and beyond. We are accountable to the leaders and organizations with bold visions for racial justice and equity who are building power in diverse communities in every part of Washington state. Our vision begins with them: their ideas, solutions, and dreams for change.

Time and again, organizations have shared with us a desire to understand how government resources are allocated, utilized and how their communities can access the public resources we all contribute to. Leaders and organizations have pointed out hundreds of instances where inequality and bias have excluded their communities due to where they live, the color of their skin, immigration status, and many other interconnected identities. We continue to hear about systemic failures in how resources were distributed and how that exacerbated racial and geographic inequities during the pandemic. Despite a historic infusion of federal funds to Washington state, in many places, and in many communities the resources did not reach the most impacted people. We convened a research advisory committee comprising local leaders and experts representing multiple identities and the breadth of our state's geography who explored key questions; *What could it look like for local and state government to partner better and smarter with communities? What lessons could be learned from the experience of organizing and advocating for federal funds during the pandemic that we can bring into today? What role do funders play in an ecosystem that supports and sustains communities in building power for racial justice and equity?*

To help answer these questions, we partnered with the Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy at The New School to conduct the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Budget Equity project. The following report shares important lessons for organizations, government, and philanthropy as we work to build a more equitable democracy.

- Organized communities who understand how to navigate power made a significant difference in gaining access to ARPA funds and improving the conditions of people's lives.
- Accountable and connected government leaders can make a profound difference.
- Bridge-building institutions such as funders and large anchor organizations successfully leveraged their power to open doors and align capital for vulnerable communities.
- Local governments that had policies, practices and protocols to ensure equitable spending, spent their resources in much fairer and transparent ways that ensured resources reached the communities they were intended to target.

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- There are sophisticated leaders with a commitment to equity and racial justice who live in every corner of our state, and they believe in the power of government to make a difference in people's lives.

We recognize that we are publishing this report during a time when communities of color, immigrant communities, and LGBTQIA+ communities are under attack, as federal funds sustaining vital care and services are cut, and our fundamental freedoms are being eroded. **This moment requires us to be bold, unapologetic and to remember that public budgets belong to the people of Washington.** It is also true that many of our peers in the charitable sector are shying away or abandoning a focus on equity and racial justice while decreasing funding for community organizing and discouraging leaders and organizations from engaging in political advocacy.

**This is the time, now more than ever, to resource community power and political advocacy at every level of government.** Public budgets—from the very local to state and federal budgets, are a critical way we ensure opportunity in everyday people's lives. A strong and reflective multiracial democracy requires active and sustained civic participation from every part of society, and in every corner of our state. In the words of an Inatai grantee and organizational leader, we will achieve our vision when "the government is made up of people like us and is accountable to us." We at Inatai hope that this report offers some concrete lessons for how you might play your best role in advancing these goals. We remain steadfast in our commitment to making the vision of racial justice and equity in Washington and beyond a reality.



Nichole June Maher  
President & CEO

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On January 20, 2020, a man checked into an urgent care clinic in Snohomish, Washington, and was diagnosed with the first case of COVID-19 in the United States. Washington quickly became ground zero for the public health crisis and the stark racial inequities it exposed, with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native communities suffering the highest rates of illness and death.<sup>1</sup> Grassroots organizations rooted in these communities were the first responders, leveraging their networks to deliver critical care, support, and resources.

Fourteen months later, amid the reignited racial justice movement sparked by the murder of George Floyd, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 directed billions in flexible relief dollars to states and localities to provide urgent relief and rebuild stronger, more equitable communities. Undergirded by the Biden administration's groundbreaking equity policy, which built upon decades of local organizing and innovation, ARPA created an unprecedented opportunity to deliver tangible, potentially transformative change to communities long neglected by public investment.

This report examines how ARPA unfolded in Washington State, focusing on the experiences of local leaders working to build power and amplify the voices of underserved communities of color. We ask: How did advocacy from the most impacted communities shape local ARPA investments? And what does their experience

teach us about building more just, equitable, and accountable public budget processes in the future? To answer these questions, we interviewed organizers and government staff who engaged in advocacy for equitable ARPA funding in their communities and examined public spending data.

We found that community advocacy played a decisive role in translating federal equity guidance into local practice, though with uneven and sometimes limited results. In some jurisdictions, organizations and grassroots coalitions rooted in low-income communities of color secured inclusive engagement processes and redirected ARPA dollars toward urgent community needs such as direct cash assistance and safe water infrastructure. At times, ARPA advocacy strengthened grassroots leadership and forged new channels of collaboration between community groups and local governments.

These ARPA advocacy experiences illustrate important catalysts and constraints to equitable public investment. Organized communities advanced equity when supportive institutions, equity infrastructure, and accountable government leaders backed their efforts. Under-resourced governments, inconsistent standards, symbolic or underdeveloped equity efforts, and reactive governance slowed progress or limited impact.

While ARPA funds have been spent, the experience offers critical lessons for advancing equity in the evergreen public budgeting process.

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1 Washington State Department of Health. 2024. "COVID-19 morbidity and mortality by race, ethnicity and spoken language in Washington state." <https://doh.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-02/COVID-19MorbidityMortalityRaceEthnicityLanguageWAState.pdf>

The work ahead is to implement enduring practices that ensure historically underrepresented and underserved communities have the power, resources, and representation to shape public investments for collective prosperity. Resourcing community organizations to engage in budget advocacy, establishing accountability mechanisms throughout the budget cycle, and increasing representation in local government stand out as crucial levers for transforming public budget processes. Organizers, government actors, and funders each have vital roles to play in making equitable and community-driven investments the norm.

In a time of economic and social uncertainty and federal retrenchment, local public budgets matter now more than ever. Across Washington and beyond, community advocates are fighting for budgets to become instruments of justice. This is a pivotal moment to reimagine and reshape how public dollars can work to ensure that everyone can thrive, especially those who have been historically excluded from public investment.



Community members organizing mutual aid during the organization's Pasifika Kirisimasi event in December 2020.  
Photo credit: Pacific Islander Community Association of Washington

# ARPA'S HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare deep racial and economic disparities, with low-income communities and communities of color suffering the most severe health impacts,<sup>2</sup> job losses,<sup>3</sup> and housing instability.<sup>4</sup> The convergence of the public health crisis, the threat of economic collapse, and a national racial reckoning generated an urgency not seen in decades. For a brief but powerful moment, a shared sense of vulnerability activated the political will to invest in an equitable recovery.

In this political opening, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA), delivering \$1.9 trillion in COVID relief, including \$350 billion in State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF). Of that, \$130 billion flowed directly to cities and counties, giving local governments unprecedented flexibility to deliver economic relief and interventions to address the inequities exposed by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. Treasury's guidance for ARPA marked a significant shift in federal relief policy.<sup>6</sup> Backed by two racial equity executive orders from the Biden administration, equity was established as a core

principle for the recovery spending.<sup>7</sup> For the first time, federal guidelines explicitly encouraged targeting funds to communities of color, tribal nations, and low-income populations disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and longstanding structural inequities. These dollars could be used for investing in people-focused initiatives like medical debt elimination, guaranteed income pilots, and community crisis response teams.

"COVID-19 posed a universal threat... I had never seen anything like it: a moment when society, reflected through its elected officials, acted boldly and decisively to protect people. It showed what is possible when there is the will to do something dramatic and visionary."

—Howard Greenwich  
Puget Sound Sage, Seattle

- 2 Flagg, L.D., Campbell, L.A., (May 31, 2021) "COVID-19 in Communities of Color: Structural Racism and Social Determinants of Health." OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing Vol. 26, No. 2, Manuscript 6.
- 3 Gutkowski, Violeta. "Demographic Disparities in COVID-19 Disruptions: What Has Shaped Them?" Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review, Fourth Quarter 2023, 261-79. <https://doi.org/10.20955/r.105.261-79>
- 4 Chun, Y., Roll, S., Miller, S., Lee, H., Larimore, S., & Grinstein-Weiss, M. 2023. Racial and ethnic disparities in housing instability during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of assets and income shocks. *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy*, 6(2), 63-81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41996-022-00109-5>
- 5 U.S. Government Accountability Office. 2023. "COVID-19 Relief: States' and Localities' Fiscal Recovery Funds Spending as of March 31, 2023." <https://www.gao.gov/assets/d24106753.pdf>
- 6 Department of Treasury. 2022. "Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds Final Rule." <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2022-01-27/pdf/2022-00292.pdf>
- 7 The White House, "Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government." The White House. Jan. 20, 2021. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/equity/>

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Alongside this equity priority, Treasury emphasized transparency, accountability, and community input in SLFRF spending. All jurisdictions were required to report on fund expenditures, and those with populations over 250,000 were obligated to submit annual progress reports detailing how their investments advanced equitable outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Local governments were also urged to engage their communities, particularly from historically underserved populations, in shaping spending decisions.

The Treasury directed SLFRF recipients to consider equity throughout program design and implementation—evaluating who benefits, how communities learn about programs, who can access them, and whether outcomes close racial and economic gaps.

This report, produced by the Institute on Race, Power and Political Economy in partnership with the Inatai Foundation and its research advisory committee, examines Washington state's ARPA experience through the lens of local leaders. It centers the efforts of those working to build power, particularly smaller and rural jurisdictions beyond the Seattle metro area. These communities have been historically underinvested

in by government and philanthropy, yet represent significant and growing populations in the state.<sup>9</sup>

We ask: How did advocacy from the most impacted communities affect ARPA investments, and what does their experience teach us about building more just, equitable, and accountable public budgeting? Our hypothesis was that when communities lead, governments are more likely to fund projects that improve people's daily lives—like stable, affordable housing, access to services, and neighborhood infrastructure. We also expected that increased community power—the capacity for most impacted by inequities to shape the policies and institutions that govern their lives—would lead to more equitable public investments.

This research builds upon our framework for examining equity in American Rescue Plan Act fiscal recovery fund spending.<sup>10</sup> Our qualitative research included a series of interviews with organizers and government staff who engaged in advocacy for equitable ARPA funding in their communities. We also examined the public spending data for eight counties and six cities using our 40-question ARPA Equity Assessment rubric. *See the Appendix for our full methodology.*

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- 8 The Treasury directed SLFRF recipients to consider equity throughout program design and implementation: evaluating who benefits (goals), how communities learn about programs (awareness), who can access them (access and distribution), and whether outcomes close racial and economic gaps (outcomes and targets). <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/SLFRF-Compliance-and-Reporting-Guidance.pdf>
- 9 "Washington population growth slowing - Office of Financial Management." 2025. OFM. <https://ofm.wa.gov/news-publications/washington-population-growth-slowing/>
- 10 Treuhaft, Sarah, Thomas, Ashley, Al-Khaldi, Fatimah, and Ihejirika, Chidera. 2024. "Advancing Equity with the American Rescue Plan Act's Local Recovery Funds." <https://budgetequity.racepowerpolicy.org/reports/arpa-funds-advancing-equity>

We begin by describing advocacy strategies for equitable ARPA investments in Washington state and success stories. Analyzing what drove success, we present key catalysts and constraints to equitable ARPA investment and share a case study of those forces at work in Spokane. We then describe how the Trump administration's

rollback of federal equity initiatives has impacted Washington's community organizations, leading to reductions in social services and the erosion of local equity efforts. We conclude with recommendations for building community power and advancing budget equity beyond a crisis.



Immigrant and refugee advocacy day in Olympia hosted by the Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network in January 2023.  
Photo credit: Ulysses Curry

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# ORGANIZERS PUT EQUITY FRONT AND CENTER

As the first state to confront COVID-19 in January 2020, Washington faced immediate and sweeping disruption. Schools closed. Businesses shuttered. Communities across the state felt the shock of a dual public health and economic crisis. When the virus spread east from Puget Sound into Eastern Washington, the region's dependence on essential industries like agriculture and manufacturing left its workers especially vulnerable.<sup>11</sup>

Rural and underserved communities were severely impacted as healthcare facilities, already financially precarious, faced staffing shortages that couldn't handle the surge of demand.<sup>12</sup> Stark racial disparities emerged as communities of color bore a far higher COVID-19 burden: Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander residents experienced the highest hospitalization and death rates—about five times those of white populations—while Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native communities faced rates roughly two to three times higher.<sup>13</sup>

Organizations rooted in the most impacted communities were the first responders, delivering lifesaving health and social services from the outset. They established mutual aid networks and deployed trusted volunteers to deliver groceries,

distribute PPE, and connect people to care. When federal relief first came through the CARES Act, these organizations quickly mobilized to demand dollars reach those most in need. The Washington Equity Relief Fund provided \$11.85 million in CARES funds to 385 nonprofits, 90 percent of which were led by and serving BIPOC communities.<sup>14</sup> By the time ARPA arrived, advocates were ready to capitalize on its equity guidance to win investments for their communities.

BIPOC-led nonprofits rose to meet the moment. Long before the pandemic, they had been doing the steady work of pushing public institutions to invest in historically underserved communities. Their deep community ties, organizing experience, and policy knowledge positioned them to seize the opportunity created by ARPA.

The ARPA story in Washington is one of both meaningful wins and missed opportunities. In the face of once-in-a-generation federal funding, some localities answered community calls for a new, equitable approach, while others maintained business as usual.

Where equity was realized, it was often because of organizers. Under the constraints

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11 Finchum-Mason, E., Husted, K., Gugerty, M.K., & Barnhart, E. 2020. Local impacts of a global crisis: How Washington state nonprofits are responding to COVID-19. Nancy Bell Evans Center on Nonprofits & Philanthropy <https://evans.uw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NBEC-Local-Impacts-of-a-Global-Crisis-How-Washington-state-nonprofits-are-responding-to-COVID-19-1.pdf>

12 Oster, N.V., Patterson, D.G., Skillman, S.M., Frogner, B.K. COVID-19 and the Rural Health Workforce: The Impact of Federal Pandemic Funding to Address Workforce Needs. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, March 2022. <https://familymedicine.uw.edu/chws/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/03/Covid-19-and-the-Rural-Health-Workforce-PB-2022.pdf>

13 Washington State Department of Health. 2024. “COVID-19 morbidity and mortality by race, ethnicity and spoken language in Washington state.” <https://doh.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-02/COVID-19MorbidityMortalityRaceEthnicityLanguageWAState.pdf>

14 “WA Equity Relief Fund for Nonprofits.” n.d. Philanthropy Northwest. <https://philanthropynw.org/wa-equity-relief-fund-nonprofits>

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of COVID, they adapted and reimagined organizing through virtual meetings and wearing PPE for in-person mobilizations. They formed coalitions to expand their reach and deepened relationships with their local governments. Their actions turned the promise of equity into practice. ARPA created the opening, but it was organizers who filled that space with community priorities and demanded equity at the center.

While advocates did not win every campaign for equitable ARPA investments, their victories show how community advocacy paired with equity-focused recovery funding can transform crisis response into equitable public investment across several dimensions.

### Inclusive Community Engagement

ARPA's unprecedented equity guidelines created an opening for more inclusive community engagement practices. Community advocates worked to ensure this guidance was put into practice, not just written on paper. Advocates pushed governments to create more meaningful opportunities for residents most impacted by the pandemic to shape how dollars were spent. In some places, equity advocates working inside and outside of government piloted more accessible engagement strategies that broke from business as usual, including conducting targeted outreach to marginalized communities and removing the typical barriers that working-class residents face to participating in public meetings.

Snohomish County's Office of Recovery and Resilience stands out for intentionally removing barriers.<sup>15</sup> They provided childcare, meals, transportation, and language interpretation to ensure residents could participate meaningfully in ARPA decision-making. Their comprehensive approach included convening community leaders serving those most impacted by the pandemic, meeting with leadership from 17 cities and towns, and hosting five in-person Recovery Roadshows where residents discussed and voted on recovery priorities.

### Equitable Public Investments

Community organizations and advocates played a decisive role in shaping how ARPA funds were used. They mobilized residents, surfaced community priorities, and demanded that relief dollars address longstanding inequities rather than reinforce them. Their advocacy pushed local and state governments to rethink traditional spending patterns by funding new equitable investments, strengthening programs that work, and redirecting resources away from inequitable uses.

At the state level, a coalition of immigrant rights groups—including Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network (WAISN), Washington Dream Coalition, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP), and One America—secured \$400 million for the WA State Immigrant Relief Fund, designed and led by undocumented residents.

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<sup>15</sup> Snohomish County Office of Recovery and Resilience. n.d. "Snohomish County Pandemic Recovery Outreach & Priorities." <https://snohomishcountywa.gov/6046/Community-Recovery-Priorities>

In Kenmore, a smaller city outside of Seattle, community input guided \$1 million in ARPA funding for direct cash assistance. Feedback from the community led the city to increase payments (from \$500 to \$2,000) and expand eligibility (from 30% to 50% AMI), ensuring broader, more effective support. In Mabton, Yakima County, where there is a longstanding water crisis, persistent advocacy by the Chicana/Latina-led organization ELLA Adelante redirected funding proposed for a recreational splash pad toward a water tank mixer and a pilot water treatment study to address the toxins in the water supply.

### Grassroots Leadership

Community advocacy for equitable ARPA allocations sparked a political awakening for emerging and established organizations. It created a foundation for these groups to build on their pandemic-era advocacy, expanding their movement base and leadership capacity. These organizations built trust by consistently showing up, fighting for their people, and demonstrating that political wins are possible.

In Yakima County, ELLA, founded at the onset of the pandemic, rapidly built its policy expertise to become a lobbying force for its community. Recognizing knowledge gaps among both their members and local officials, ELLA organized training sessions with the Governor's Office, the Department of Commerce, and the Washington State Environmental Justice Council—equipping themselves and their allies in government to advocate more effectively.

“It’s transformed our political organization into a real lobbying force—focused on funding access and visibility. We’re no longer staying quiet. We’re stating what we need, why we need it, and demanding answers when local governments fail to act. It’s made us more assertive in our advocacy.”

—Maria Fernandez  
ELLA, Yakima County

### Collaborative Governance

In some places, ARPA advocacy established new collaborations between community-based organizations and local governments. Community leaders gained closer access to institutional decision-making, while elected officials grew their understanding of community needs. These relationships now extend beyond ARPA, with the potential to shape local budget cycles and equity policies within government.

In Spokane, a coalition of 16 BIPOC-led organizations demanded more inclusion in the city’s ARPA process, which opened lasting channels into City Hall. Today, representatives from Pacific Islander Community Association (PICA) and Mujeres in Action sit on the City Council’s Equity Subcommittee.

# CATALYSTS AND CONSTRAINTS TO EQUITABLE PUBLIC INVESTMENT

Community advocacy opened the door to more equitable allocations, but its impact depended on other forces—some that enabled progress and others that held it back. Analyzing the drivers of success, we found that organized community networks, equity-minded government leaders, and institutions willing to leverage their influence undergirded community wins. At the same time, bureaucratic bottlenecks, opaque processes, and nascent government equity initiatives limited their effectiveness. These catalysts and constraints didn't operate in isolation; they interacted, sometimes amplifying momentum and other times blocking it to shape ARPA outcomes. Below, we describe them, drawing from our Spokane case study (see page 18) and other Washington state examples.

## CATALYSTS TO EQUITABLE PUBLIC INVESTMENT

### *Organized Communities*

Organized communities are the driving force that surfaces priorities, builds coalitions, and sustains pressure to ensure public investments reflect equity goals. Trusted, embedded community organizations build power with strategy and care. They cultivate coalitions and unite diverse community members around a shared agenda. Through political education and relentless outreach, they mobilize residents to voice their priorities to elected officials.

In Yakima County, ELLA develops Latina leaders through training in grassroots organizing, governance, and advocacy. Guided by a community-informed advocacy agenda, ELLA builds a pipeline of Latinas into decision-making roles while fighting for equitable investments for all underrepresented communities. In Mabton,

ELLA educated community members about the water crisis, filling council chambers until members shifted their ARPA allocations. To deepen political understanding, ELLA convened state agencies to train city officials and community members together on how public funds can be used.

“I’ll be quite frank, it was us. It was just us walking the new council members through exactly how to get that splash pad off the table. It was such a fight that we were there for every single council meeting, advising, even from the audience.”

—Maria Fernandez  
ELLA, Yakima County

### *Bridge-building Institutions*

Bridge-building institutions are funders and anchor organizations that use their power to open doors and align resources behind community leadership. By convening stakeholders, providing financial support, and connecting organizers directly to decision-makers, they amplify rather than replace community voice. When institutions engage in power-sharing like this, they build community power and model what inclusive community engagement practices can look like.

In Spokane, Waters Meet modeled how funders can shift power by convening BIPOC-led organizations, compensating them for their time, and connecting them directly with city staff.

Rather than speaking for the coalition, they backed their advocacy, helping secure changes that made ARPA grants more accessible to communities of color.

### **Accountable Government Leaders**

Accountable government leaders, both elected officials and staff, serve as the bridge between community priorities and public investment. Elected officials can champion equity as a governing principle and transform community demands into political and legal mandates. Government staff operationalize these commitments from within by drafting RFPs that prioritize impacted communities, analyzing disaggregated data to monitor progress, and keeping a live line between community and decision-makers. Budget staff can embed equity into processes and allocations, and communications and procurement teams can ensure inclusive engagement and equitable contracting for businesses owned by entrepreneurs of color. In partnership with advocates, these staff translate community priorities into government policy and practice, making equity wins possible.

In Spokane, the Manager of Equity and Inclusion Initiatives and the ARPA grants coordinator worked directly with community partners to make ARPA funds more accessible. Staff worked with the Latino Chamber of Commerce and Nuestras Raíces to help Spanish-speaking small business owners navigate lengthy applications and compliance requirements. Their engagement with entrepreneurs revealed the need for language access: Many applicants mistook official city messages for scams and nearly missed out on funding. Nuestras Raíces and the city continue to work together to increase awareness and participation in the Working Families Tax Credit.

“We had to build bridges. It was a learning opportunity for internal staff to look at our processes and notice ways we are creating barriers or leaving people out.”

—Alex Gibilisco

**Manager of Equity and Inclusion Initiatives,  
City of Spokane**

### **Equity Infrastructure**

Government leaders dedicated to advancing equity and community voice are a key element of institutional equity infrastructure—the set of offices, staff, tools, and legal underpinnings that embed and require equity in the daily functions of government. This includes equity officers and offices with cross-departmental authority, ordinances and strategic plans that codify equity goals, and analytic tools such as equity indices or equity impact assessments. Equity infrastructure should be government wide, co-developed with the communities most impacted by racial and social inequities, and implemented with clear accountability measures. Without legal underpinnings—such as mandates, ordinances, or budget requirements—equity efforts risk becoming symbolic or short-lived rather than transformative.

Our review of ARPA performance reports found uneven adoption of equity infrastructure across Washington. Some jurisdictions had well-established structures, while others only began building them during the pandemic. Six localities—Pierce County, King County, Snohomish County, Spokane, Tacoma, and Kenmore—had some form

of equity office, staff, or policy. Kenmore, King County, and Pierce County also adopted formal equity policies.

Tacoma, for example, has an Office of Equity and Human Rights and an Equity Action Network of 80-plus governmental and community-based organizational partners that work together to shift public resources to address racial and economic inequities. In 2021, the Equity Action Network won a groundbreaking \$5 million commitment of ARPA funds for participatory budgeting, giving residents direct power to decide spending in council Districts 2 and 4. According to Tacoma's Equity Index,<sup>16</sup> District 4 (East Tacoma and the South End) is historically divested in and labeled as a mix of moderate-, low-, and very-low-opportunity areas.

More than 17,000 people participated—submitting thousands of ideas and voting to fund projects such as cultural events, youth programs, and a new skate park. While the funding was subsequently reduced to \$2.5 million due to budget cuts, the investment channeled millions toward community priorities identified by those most impacted.<sup>17</sup>

## Catalysts to Equitable Public Investment

### ▪ Organized Community

The ecosystem of community members, organizers, and organizations that consistently surface priorities, maintain pressure, and advocate for change.

### ▪ Bridge-building Institutions

The funders and large anchor organizations that leverage their power to open doors and align capital.

### ▪ Accountable Government Leaders

The equity champions within government institutions who translate community priorities into procedures, policies, and process.

### ▪ Equity Infrastructure

The legal underpinnings, systems, and structures that embed equity in government practice.

16 "Equity in Action." n.d. ArcGIS StoryMaps. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/8646c09d80d5475b8be42b0ef8c2491c>

17 City of Tacoma Management and Budget Office. n.d. Participatory Budgeting. <https://tacoma.gov/government/departments/management-and-budget-office/participatory-budgeting/>

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## CONSTRAINTS TO EQUITABLE PUBLIC INVESTMENT

### ***Under-resourced Governments***

Under-resourced governments lack the staff and funding needed to prioritize equity in budgeting and program design. Smaller jurisdictions, many unfamiliar with managing direct federal dollars, were particularly challenged. Our assessment found that the small jurisdictions of Chelan, Franklin County, Grays Harbor County, Kenmore, Mabton, and Port Angeles scored at the bottom across nearly every dimension of equitable ARPA investment, including community engagement, decision-making tools, transparency, accountability, and equity focus. With limited staff and virtually no dedicated equity infrastructure, these governments struggled to implement ARPA with equity at the forefront.

Port Angeles City Council Member Lindsey Schromen-Wawrin describes how the state's restriction on local taxation and underfunding of smaller municipalities weakened ARPA's potential. Smaller jurisdictions often struggled to hire even one staff member to manage grant writing and implementation. While ARPA's design of direct allocations with clear spending rules helped resource-strapped areas put dollars to use quickly, its flexible revenue loss provisions meant that many used the dollars to plug ongoing budget gaps rather than pursue transformative, forward-looking investments.

"Rep. Kilmer came to one of our City Council meetings to talk about this funding [and] all the great things we could potentially do with it. When he finished his presentation, I just thought, 'Okay, are you also sending five staffers to parachute into City Hall to help us navigate this?'"

—Lindsey Schromen-Wawrin  
Port Angeles City Council Member

### ***Inconsistent Equity Standards***

Without consistent equity standards across jurisdictions, ARPA allocations often reflected local discretion more than community needs. The Treasury set unprecedented equity guidance for ARPA spending and required large jurisdictions (250,000-plus) to publish Recovery Plan Performance Reports outlining their equity goals and community engagement efforts. However, the program's broad flexibility and exemptions for smaller jurisdictions led to wide variation in how equity principles were applied and whether transparency was maintained.

Yakima County illustrates this gap. In its ARPA performance report, the county acknowledged equity goals, pledging to "promote strong, equitable growth, including racial equity." Yet it returned \$2.4 million in unspent funds. Despite community calls for urgent housing investments, a large share of ARPA dollars went to the Sheriff's Office. Opportunities for community input were also minimal. In response, the Latino Community Fund organized listening sessions and advocacy efforts to push for rental assistance.

Groups like ELLA learned about allocations through news coverage rather than direct communication from the county. And although Yakima met the federal reporting threshold, they did not follow reporting guidelines, publishing only a single executive summary and a final 2025 report.

### **Nascent Equity Efforts**

Nascent equity efforts often struggle to operationalize a local government's commitment to racial equity, leaving the community frustrated by the disconnect between lofty rhetoric and minimal or faltering action. Mass demands for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 led to many Washington State local governments making new official commitments to address racial inequities, which is a critical first step. But embedding equity throughout government is a long-term process of institutional change that requires a strong legal foundation, committed leadership, and a methodical approach to conducting equity analyses and normalizing equity across government departments and functions. The conviction behind the governments making these commitments varied, and some were more symbolic or performative than real.

In Spokane, early ARPA engagement efforts such as an online survey and public forums with community-based organizations included outreach to ensure historically excluded communities could voice their priorities. The challenge emerged later: the first RFP relied on an online procurement system that was inaccessible for many grassroots BIPOC-led organizations and even seasoned grant writers. The RFP structure undermined initial inclusive engagement, prompting advocates to press for a more accessible process.

### **Reactive Governance**

Reactive governance is when governments address equity issues in response to community pressure, rather than integrating equity considerations into decision-making from the start. Communities most affected by inequities are forced to organize and advocate for fair investment, creating stress and mistrust. This dynamic shifts the burden onto impacted communities and slows the delivery of relief and community investments.

### **Constraints to Equitable Public Investment**

#### **▪ Under-resourced Governments**

The constrained staff capacity and funding of smaller jurisdictions limits their ability to prioritize equity.

#### **▪ Inconsistent Equity Standards**

The uneven application of ARPA's equity guidelines left investments dependent on who's in the room.

#### **▪ Nascent Equity Efforts**

The emerging commitments to equity that remain symbolic without the systems, leadership, and legal frameworks to produce structural change.

#### **▪ Reactive Governance**

The after-the-fact response to community pressure, rather than initiating equity-driven processes.

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ARPA advocacy examples from around the state illustrate how these catalysts and constraints reflected the push and pull of power in real time. Organized community networks, bridge-building institutions, accountable government leaders, and equity infrastructure made equitable investments more possible. At the same time, under-resourced governments, inconsistent standards, and reactive or symbolic equity efforts limited progress.

## CATALYSTS AND CONSTRAINTS IN ACTION: SPOKANE'S ARPA STORY

Located on the traditional homelands of the Spokane Tribe of Indians,<sup>18</sup> Spokane is Washington's second most populous city and an important economic center for Eastern Washington. More than three-quarters of the city's 230,000 residents identify as White; Hispanic and multiracial residents each make up about 7 percent, and Black, Asian, and Native American residents each represent about 3 percent.<sup>19</sup> The city's demographics are changing, with communities of color growing as a share of

the workforce and business owners.<sup>20</sup> Although poverty rates have declined for most groups, disparities persist: American Indian and Alaska Natives earn the lowest median incomes, and Black residents face the highest unemployment.<sup>21</sup>

By the time \$80.9 million in ARPA funds arrived in May 2021, Spokane had begun building internal policy infrastructure to embed equity throughout its operations. In 2020, the incoming City Council president introduced Spokane's first formal equity efforts within local government, and the city hired its first Manager of Equity and Inclusion Initiatives. In November 2021, the council created an Equity Subcommittee within its Finance and Administration Committee.<sup>22</sup> The subcommittee brings together community members from the most impacted communities, the Equity Manager, and a City Council liaison. Although the subcommittee is advisory and lacks decision-making authority, it recommends equity-centered policy and budget changes and has become a forum for identifying inequities in city services and program design.

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18 "HISTORY – Spokane Tribe of Indians." n.d. Spokane Tribe of Indians. <https://www.spokanetribe.com/history/>

19 Census Dots. n.d. "Spokane, WA Demographics A map of Spokane's Population by Race." <https://www.censusdots.com/race/spokane-wa-demographics>

20 The Community Indicators Initiative of Spokane. n.d. "ECONOMIC VITALITY." Businesses Owned by People of Color-Total & Share of All Businesses. [https://www.spokanetrends.org/graph.cfm?cat\\_id=2&sub\\_cat\\_id=6&ind\\_id=3](https://www.spokanetrends.org/graph.cfm?cat_id=2&sub_cat_id=6&ind_id=3)

21 The Community Indicators Initiative of Spokane. n.d. "ECONOMIC VITALITY." Poverty Rates by Race/Ethnicity. [https://www.spokanetrends.org/graph.cfm?cat\\_id=2&sub\\_cat\\_id=6&ind\\_id=3](https://www.spokanetrends.org/graph.cfm?cat_id=2&sub_cat_id=6&ind_id=3)

22 Shanks, Adam. 2021. "Wilkerson spearheads formation of new equity subcommittee in Spokane City Hall." The Spokesman Review (Spokane), December 6, 2021. <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/dec/06/wilkerson-spearheads-formation-of-new-equity-subco/>

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At the outset of ARPA planning, Spokane adopted an equity statement and a spending framework intended to live up to that commitment. Their ARPA framework outlined four broad goals: restoring services, supporting community partners, investing in long-term resiliency, and providing relief for residents in business.<sup>23</sup> The City Council's ARPA workgroup emphasized that priorities should be community-driven, created a temporary community engagement role, and held public forums across all three districts. In addition to in-person engagement, the city posted an online survey that generated over 2,000 investment ideas.

The Cultural Event Incentive Grant was Spokane's first round of ARPA grants for nonprofits. Over \$500,000 was allocated to community-based organizations serving historically excluded communities—an early indication of the City's commitment to their equity vision. Yet, the experience also revealed critical access barriers—the City received feedback that the ARPA RFP platform was difficult to navigate for many grassroots groups. While this first round of ARPA awards reflected Spokane's equity intentions, these intentions were undermined by an inaccessible RFP process.

Even though many dollars reached diverse community organizations in the first round, the process itself signaled that adjustments were necessary to ensure equitable access moving forward. Smaller and BIPOC-led organizations

expressed experiencing barriers including a complicated online portal, English-only materials, short timelines, and reimbursement-only awards requiring upfront capital smaller groups did not have. Ultimately the process advantaged well-resourced organizations and excluded many community providers closest to the systemic disparities intensified by pandemic. A disconnect emerged between communities helping to shape ARPA priorities and their ability to access the very dollars they influenced. The result: Spokane's equity commitments failed to fully translate into an application process that grassroots organizations could realistically navigate.

In 2022, 16 BIPOC-led organizations formed a coalition, backed by the Waters Meet<sup>24</sup> foundation's Building Equitable Economies Initiative, to push for a more accessible RFP process. They met with the City Council and submitted letters detailing the barriers of reimbursement-only contracts, unclear eligibility, and lack of application support. The coalition proposed concrete solutions for accessibility and inclusion: extended deadlines, language translation, technical assistance, and equity-based scoring to prioritize the hardest-hit populations.

Collective power moved the city to course correct with more inclusive practices. In partnership with the coalition, the Manager of Equity and Inclusion Initiatives and a new ARPA Coordinator established biweekly meetings,

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<sup>23</sup> Gardner, Lisa, and Spokane City Council Communications Director. 2021. "Spokane City Council Approves Resolution Establishing Framework of Funds Received From Federal American Rescue Plan." <https://my.spokanecity.org/news/releases/2021/06/15/council-passes-resolution-to-deploy-american-rescue-plan-act-funds/>

<sup>24</sup> Formerly named Empire Health Foundation. <https://www.empirehealthfoundation.org>

extended deadlines, added an equity scoring rubric, hosted virtual information sessions, published FAQ, provided Spanish translation, and partnered with trusted messengers for targeted outreach. These improvements were applied across subsequent RFP processes, including Youth Behavioral Health Grants, Assistance to Small Business Grants, and Nonprofit Grants. These changes increased access: after the RFP process became more inclusive, 11 of the 16 coalition organizations secured awards from the \$5 million nonprofit pool.

Even as the city adapted its nonprofit RFP process to be more equitable and accessible, another barrier emerged. The city established eligibility criteria requiring nonprofits to have their principal place of business within Spokane's city limits. That standard disqualified nonprofits that served Spokane residents but had a primary business address in another location in the state. As a result, one coalition member, Pacific Islander Community Action Network (PICA), was shut out of grant opportunities, despite its deep local impact.

PICA's public health leadership during COVID saved lives in Spokane. Although Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders make up just 1% of Spokane's population, they accounted for 67% of positive COVID cases early in the pandemic. PICA responded with a rapid, community-led effort. They partnered with public health officials to launch testing and vaccination clinics that helped reduce infection rates in the NH/PI community to just 5%. Despite this proven record, the city's criteria sidelined PICA and

missed the opportunity to support an effective provider. By contrast, Clark County's more accessible ARPA process awarded PICA \$100,000 in flexible, unrestricted funding, which sustained and strengthened its operating capacity into the following year.

"I don't want this framed as just community organizations holding government accountable; it was an ecosystem. The funder played a crucial role by using their power effectively, while community groups organized and brought the priorities. This was a positive example of a funder helping build power in partnership rather than overshadowing it."

—Kiana McKenna  
PICA, City of Spokane

Spokane's pivot to remove RFP barriers was real but reactive, achieved only through sustained community pressure. The city is now working to embed equity more structurally, though the Equity Subcommittee's advisory role limits its impact. Still, Spokane showed it can adapt and translate community feedback into concrete improvements. Relationships forged through ARPA have continued: Coalition members PICA and Mujeres in Action now serve on the subcommittee, bringing lived experience and ARPA lessons that influence ongoing equity advocacy in the city.

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## Success Factors that Drove More Equitable ARPA Investment in Spokane:

- **Sixteen BIPOC-led groups organized collectively.**

They recognized the breadth of exclusion and understood it as a collective problem for their peer organizations. The coalition won fixes that sought to open access for all overlooked BIPOC-led organizations.

- **The coalition named solutions, not just the problems.**

They paired critique with concrete proposals to remove the barriers organizations were experiencing.

- **Regular working sessions with city staff-maintained accountability.**

With a solutions-oriented agenda and biweekly check-ins, the coalition ensured the work was completed to change the RFP grantmaking process.

- **Waters Meet's Building Equitable Economies Initiative opened doors and built capacity.**

They prioritized a power-with instead of power-over relationship with the coalition, ensuring the community set the agenda. They set up the scaffolding BIPOC-led community-based organizations needed to access ARPA. They provided technical assistance, community learning sessions, and regular convenings to equip the coalition with concrete tools, know-how, and confidence to navigate and dismantle the RFP obstacles.

The Spokane experience shows how catalysts and constraints to equitable ARPA investment unfolded through local networks and decision-makers. An organized BIPOC-led coalition pressed for an inclusive RFP process, while accountable government leaders integrated changes. Equity infrastructure like the Equity Subcommittee gave advocates a formal foothold to channel their demands. Waters Meet used its institutional power to open doors, compensate coalition

members, and help marginalized organizations access funds. Yet governance remained reactive, equity standards inconsistent, and the subcommittee limited without decision-making authority. Spokane's story is one of a community and government learning together—capable of collaboration and course correction, yet still striving to make equity a guiding principle in every budget decision.

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# GAINS UNDER THREAT

For community organizations that began to see glimmers of hope with ARPA wins, 2025 has been a year of regress. Kiana McKenna, Deputy Director of Strategy & Policy at PICA, described ARPA's impact as "two steps forward, one step back." It was a period of high-visibility advocacy, sharper articulation of community priorities, and transformative investments, but all powered by temporary dollars. The sunsetting of ARPA funds has led to painful contractions in services.

Communities have felt these cuts directly. Organizations have scaled back programs like rental assistance and case management, leaving many frustrated and without adequate support. McKenna explains: "My organization has had to massively shift the direct services we provide, and our community has struggled that the services we provided during COVID are not the same now."

One of the first moves of the Trump administration was to rescind the Biden administration's racial equity policies, instantly dismantling the federal government's incipient equity infrastructure.<sup>25</sup> Federal agencies

were instructed to shut down DEI programs and terminate equity action plans.<sup>26</sup> The administration then made coercive threats to cut funding from local governments and public agencies working to institutionalize equity in policies and operations. In 2025, King County and more than 60 local governments nationwide joined *King County v. Turner*, a federal lawsuit challenging the administration's attempt to tie federal housing, transportation, and health grants to compliance with its stances on DEI, immigration, and gender equity. In June 2025, a court issued a preliminary injunction blocking enforcement, allowing localities to continue receiving funds while the case proceeds.<sup>27</sup>

Local governments across Washington are facing mounting fiscal stress with state and federal funding cuts and flattening revenues. Cities like Spokane, Yakima, Tacoma, along with Grays Harbor<sup>28</sup> and Snohomish Counties,<sup>29</sup> are all grappling with multi-million-dollar structural deficits driven by inflation, rising labor and service costs, and revenue streams that can't keep pace

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25 "Initial Rescissions Of Harmful Executive Orders And Actions." 2025. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/initial-rescissions-of-harmful-executive-orders-and-actions/>

26 "Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing." 2025. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>

27 Public Rights Project. 2025. "60 local governments nationwide sue to stop Trump administration's extreme attack on housing, transit and health funding." Press Release. <https://www.publicrightsproject.org/news-insights/press-releases/60-local-governments-nationwide-sue-to-stop-trump-administrations-extreme-attack-on-housing-transit-and-health-funding/>

28 Grays Harbor County Administrator. n.d. "Commissioners Take a Hard-Line Implementing Reductions to Balance 2025 Budget," Press Release. <https://cms5.revize.com/revize/graysharborcounty/10302024%20Budget%20PR.pdf>

29 Richmond, Scott. 2025. "Snohomish County Council grapples with worse-than-expected budget woes | HeraldNet.com." Everett Herald, August 14, 2025. <https://www.heraldnet.com/news/snohomish-county-council-grapples-with-worse-than-expected-budget-woes/>

with expenses.<sup>30</sup> Spokane faces a \$13 million gap;<sup>31</sup> Yakima projects a \$9 million shortfall for 2026;<sup>32</sup> Tacoma anticipates a \$15 million deficit by 2027;<sup>33</sup> and Seattle confronts a \$150 million shortfall that it narrowly avoids by redirecting the progressive JumpStart payroll tax revenues to the general fund in the 2026 budget.<sup>34</sup> In this constrained environment, jurisdictions are instituting hiring freezes and department reductions, and proposing regressive taxes to generate revenue.

And ARPA's State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds are expiring soon. Jurisdictions had to obligate funds by the end of 2024 and fully expend them by December 2026. Programs that were showing signs of success are at risk of ending or have ended—not due to failure, but because the federal lifeline was temporary. Community organizations are cutting staff and scaling back services built with short-term dollars, while

governments struggle to sustain equity-focused initiatives like direct cash assistance. Under ARPA, organizers built momentum and capacity; now, amid federal rollbacks and shrinking local budgets, communities are left with fewer resources to continue their work.

“This work wasn’t sustainable—staffing levels supported by ARPA couldn’t be maintained once the funds disappeared. It wasn’t just nonprofits; government agencies are shrinking too. Nothing was sustained at the level ARPA made possible.”

—Maria Fernandez  
ELLA, Yakima County

30 Chronicle Staff. 2025. “Thurston County commissioners work to reduce deficit, determine reductions as budget talks continue | The Daily Chronicle.” The Chronicle, October 8, 2025. <https://chronline.com/stories/thurston-county-commissioners-work-to-reduce-deficit-determine-reductions-as-budget-talks-continue,388774>

31 Communications Director. 2025. “City of Spokane Faces New Budget Deficit Amid Slowing National Economy.” City of Spokane, September 18, 2025. <https://my.spokanecity.org/news/releases/2025/09/18/city-of-spokane-faces-new-budget-deficit-amid-slowing-national-economy/>

32 Palmer, Olivia. 2025. “Matt Brown and Amy Forrest seek Yakima City Council District 6 seat.” Yakima Herald-Republic, October 9, 2025. [https://www.yakimaherald.com/news/local/government/elections/matt-brown-andamy-forrest-seek-yakima-city-council-district-6-seat/article\\_eab5c6a4-c244-48b7-b94a-a1cbf23e5b63.html](https://www.yakimaherald.com/news/local/government/elections/matt-brown-andamy-forrest-seek-yakima-city-council-district-6-seat/article_eab5c6a4-c244-48b7-b94a-a1cbf23e5b63.html)

33 Trivedi, Isha. 2025. “Tacoma’s city budget hit by low revenues, rising costs.” Tacoma News Tribune, September 4, 2025. <https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article311963751.html>

34 Cohen, Josh. 2024. “Seattle Mayor staves off deep cuts in \$8.3B 2025 budget proposal.” Cascade PBS (Seattle), September 24, 2024. <https://www.cascadepbs.org/politics/2024/09/seattle-mayor-staves-deep-cuts-83b-2025-budget-proposal/>

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# BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER FOR NOW AND THE NEXT CRISIS

Community advocates brought ARPA's historic equity guidance to life, organizing to direct relief dollars to the most impacted communities. Though not everywhere and not without struggle, their persistence turned a political opening into local wins. Part of ARPA's legacy must include learning from its unique experiment in equitable public investment and answering the question: How do we build systems and structures to ensure that public dollars deliver for low-income communities of color that have long been underserved?

Community power—organized people calling for the public resources they need to live their lives with dignity and opportunity—is the foundation for building these systems and structures. Community power holds government accountable to deliver on equitable investments through advocacy and organizing strategies that target the people, institutions, and laws that shape how public dollars are raised and spent.

While there are no immediate prospects for ARPA-like flexible federal funding for local governments, every year cities and counties direct billions of dollars. In recent years, leading governments are responding to community demands, embracing equity as a key value in budgeting, and implementing tools and strategies to embed equity throughout the budget process. Emerging budget equity movements seek to ensure public dollars are allocated fairly and justly so that all residents—especially those historically underserved—can fully participate and thrive. Across the country, community organizers are realizing this vision through practical strategies like developing people's budgets and cultivating new public leaders in local government.

In Washington, the Sage Leaders Initiative and Seattle Solidarity Budget embody this growing movement.

“Budgets and funds are central to this work, even though they've often been deprioritized for community organizing efforts. We need community members at the table from the start, in the rooms where ideas are generated and decisions are shaped.”

—Kiana McKenna,  
PICA, City of Spokane

Through three interconnected programs, the Sage Leaders Initiative, an integral program of Puget Sound Sage, equips BIPOC and low-income residents with the skills and networks to step into public sector leadership. The six-month Community Leadership Institute trains emerging leaders in municipal budgeting, policymaking, and advocacy while removing barriers to participation through stipends, childcare, and transportation. Over 80 percent of graduates now serve on local boards and commissions, and others are leading nonprofits or organizing efforts across the region. Campaign Camp bridges civic and electoral leadership by preparing BIPOC candidates and campaign staff. And the Political Leadership Council endorses candidates in King, Pierce, Clark, and Yakima Counties, building a statewide network of accountable elected officials committed to racial and economic justice.

The Seattle Solidarity Budget is a community-led model of power building through budgeting. Formed in 2020 by environmental, transit, racial, and housing justice groups, the coalition calls for a city budget that centers the needs of marginalized residents by shifting public funds away from policing and toward community well-being. It educates residents on the budget process, organizes opportunities for community input, and tracks how community proposals show up in final allocations. For the 2025–2026 budget cycle, the coalition introduced a community-designed platform of nine guarantees spanning income, housing, and food security. The platform advocates for a city budget that addresses the social and economic challenges facing Seattle's most vulnerable residents.

The Seattle Solidarity Budget and Sage Leaders Initiative demonstrate how community power is defining what budget equity advocacy looks like. This growing movement shows that just and inclusive budgeting is both possible and replicable. Realizing its full potential requires coordinated action across sectors to ensure community power drives budget decisions. Governments and funders each have distinct but complementary roles in sustaining community power, institutionalizing equity practices, and expanding community leadership.

To advance local budget equity, we recommend three strategies for governments and funders to strengthen the catalysts and mitigate the constraints for equitable public investment:

- **Sustain and strengthen community power** through long-term, flexible funding for community-based organizations, including support for 501(c)(4) activities to expand advocacy capacity.
- **Institutionalize equity** with clear accountability mechanisms across the budget cycle, from racial equity analyses to transparent review and community deliberation processes.
- **Expand community leadership** by positioning individuals from historically underserved and underrepresented communities in formal decision-making roles where they can embed community priorities into policy and funding decisions at every level of governance.

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## Local Government

Local governments can embed equity into every phase of the budget cycle, from community input to evaluation. By using equity tools, disaggregated data, and inclusive community engagement, they can make budgeting more transparent, accountable, and responsive.

- **Center community voice in budgeting.**

Partner with grassroots organizations to reach communities that are underrepresented in the decision-making process. Remove barriers to participation by providing translation, childcare, and accessible forums. Create interactive spaces with budget simulations and participatory budgeting practices that let residents shape priorities, not just comment. Be transparent and accountable by publicly reporting how input was used, what was funded and why. Publish results timely and accessible for the public to shape hearings and decisions.

- **Design budgets to advance equity and community priorities.**

Require equity analysis of budget proposals, using disaggregated data to analyze who benefits and who is burdened. Shape budgets to align with community priorities and equity goals.

- **Normalize equity as a regular practice across governance.**

Fund equity offices with cross-departmental authority and staff. Form council subcommittees to review equity analysis and evaluate implementation of public investments. Empower community advisory boards to work with council subcommittees to advance community priorities through shared legislative power.

- **Hire and empower budget directors to infuse equity throughout the process.**

Analyzing gender budgeting efforts, researchers found that supportive lead budget directors play a crucial role in institutionalizing gender considerations across the budget process.<sup>35</sup> Local governments should make strategic hires, encourage and incentivize equity leadership, and equip budget offices with the tools, data, and resources needed to operationalize equity.

## Funders

Funders can strengthen the civic and infrastructure needed to institutionalize equity in public budgets. By pairing dollars with power-building strategies and convening communities, advocates, and decision-makers, philanthropy can help transform how public resources are raised and spent.

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<sup>35</sup> Rubin, Marilyn, and Bartle, John. 2023. "Equity in Public Budgeting: Lessons for the United States," *Journal of Social Equity and Public Administration* Vol. 1 No. 2. Minneapolis, MN:11-25. <https://doi.org/10.24926/jsepa.v1i2.4995>

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- **Invest in political capacity.**

Resource grassroots 501(c)(4) groups to engage directly in local politics: lobbying for budget priorities, supporting progressive revenue measures, endorsing aligned candidates, and conducting year-round political education so members can track the budget and participate in hearings. Funders can also offer technical assistance to help nonprofits establish a separate 501(c)(4) entity.

Funders should also ensure their grantees fully exercise their 501(c)(3) advocacy capacity. Many nonprofits underestimate how much advocacy the law allows. While barred from supporting political candidates, nonprofits can lobby for policies within legal limits. They can engage in nonpartisan voter registration, voter education, and civic engagement. Funders can play a pivotal role in clarifying these rules and building capacity for organizations to exercise their full advocacy abilities.

- **Invest in grassroots infrastructure for power building, policy, and budget influence.**

Build capacity both within organizations and across networks to strengthen the advocacy ecosystem. Provide multiyear, unrestricted funding so grassroots groups can hire and retain policy, budget, and organizing staff—not just program staff—who can track budget timelines, draft amendments, and engage directly with council and agency staff. At the same time, resource and sustain cross-issue coalitions for equitable public budgets. Compensate members for their time, offer convening spaces for collaboration, and support

“How does (c)(4) funding play into this? Success often depends on what kind of political power a community holds. Was it just (c)(3) nonprofits doing service and advocacy, or were there unions, or groups with (c)(4) arms doing endorsements and electoral work? The leverage points are different, and they shape which strategies succeed.”

—Eli Taylor Goss

WA State Budget & Policy Center, Statewide

coalitions that bridge organizations of different sizes and strengths.

- **Leverage power to open doors for communities.**

Convene partners across government, philanthropy, and community to co-create budget equity strategies, and align public and private dollars. Hold partners accountable to equity priorities and policies shaped by community voices.

These strategic interventions offer governments and funders a framework to make budget equity a consistent practice rather than a crisis response. By sustaining community power, institutionalizing equity throughout the budget process, and expanding pathways for representative leadership, they can strengthen the local ecosystem of budget equity. Doing so will make local budgets more accountable, resilient, and responsive to communities most impacted by inequities and historically excluded from public investment.

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# CONCLUSION

ARPA offered a glimpse of the type of local innovation that is possible when equity is centered in public spending. In Washington, community advocates used that opening to involve residents in decision-making, direct funds to transformative and community-centered projects, and build new structures to engage in governance.

These victories were uneven and hard-fought, but they showed that equitable budgeting is possible. When community power is met with a government willing to deliver, investments can reach those most harmed by systemic racism and inequities.

Budgets become instruments of repair and possibility when communities most impacted by inequities have the power to define priorities and direct resources. Washington's ARPA experience shows that even within constraints, local leadership and community advocacy can reimagine budgets as vehicles for dignity, belonging, and shared prosperity. In this current political landscape, it is time to double down on investing in community power—the driving force of equitable budgeting, policies, and practices.

The path forward is to make equity the standard, not the exception. That means providing community organizations with stable, long-term funding; embedding equity tools into every step of the budget process; and expanding representation of underserved communities in positions of real decision-making power. Funders, governments, and organizers can work together to build and sustain an ecosystem that makes equitable budgeting possible in ordinary times—not just during crises. ARPA cracked the door open; now the work is to widen it, so that public budgets consistently reflect priorities of those most impacted by inequities.

“We need to be ready for the next infusion of resources—whether federal, state, or local. But this isn’t just about ARPA dollars; it’s about base-building and motivating communities, no matter where the money comes from. What we’re really talking about is advocacy with elected officials and public funds—and identifying the best practices for doing it effectively when there’s an organized base and process in place.”

—Eli Taylor Goss  
**Washington State Budget & Policy Center,  
Statewide**

# APPENDIX

## METHODOLOGY

### *Qualitative Research*

To understand how the ARPA experience unfolded in local communities, we interviewed members of Inatai Foundation's research advisory team and additional stakeholders directly involved in ARPA implementation. We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews in April and May 2025 with members of the Inatai Foundation's research advisory team and additional stakeholders directly involved in ARPA implementation. Where relevant, secondary sources (council minutes, ordinances, local news) were reviewed to supplement and contextualize interview data.

### *Research Advisory Team Members:*

- **Irving L. Brown Sr.**, Chapter President, Tri-Cities NAACP
- **Maria Fernandez**, Executive Director, Ella, Yakima and Yakima County
- **Howard Greenwich**, Research Director, Puget Sound Sage, King County
- **Eli Taylor Goss**, Executive Director, Washington State Budget & Policy Center, Statewide
- **Krista Milhofer**, Program Administrator, People First of Washington
- **Kiana McKenna**, Deputy Director of Strategy and Policy, PICA, Spokane and Spokane County
- **Lindsey Schromen-Wawrin**, Policy & Partnerships Manager, Firelands, Grays Harbor County

### *Additional Stakeholder Interviewees:*

- **Jacob Ewing**, Special Projects Coordinator, Association of Washington Cities
- **Caleb Stanton**, City of Spokane Grants Analyst
- **Lisa Gardner**, City of Spokane Director of Communications and Community Engagement
- **Alexander Gibilisco**, City of Spokane Manager of Equity Initiatives

### *Convenings with Inatai Research Advisory Team*

The Institute and the Inatai research advisory team convened twice during this project—first in February 2025 to launch the work and share prior ARPA research, and again in June 2025 to report back with insights from interviews. The June session served as a collaborative checkpoint to vet findings, refine research questions, and ensure the analysis reflected lived experience, with advisory perspectives informing the report throughout. Together, we grounded the project in the core value of community power and gathered guidance on how to shape the work. Where relevant, perspectives shared in the convenings informed both the analysis and findings presented in this report.

This process reflected Inatai's commitment to community-driven research: engaging local organizations to shape and vet research so it is both grounded in community needs and actionable for advocacy.

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## Assessment of Public Spending Data

Our review of Washington State's ARPA investments builds on our 2024 national ARPA Equity Assessment, which uses public data sources to assess equity performance across six dimensions: 1) overall equity focus; 2) application of equity tools and institutional infrastructure; 3) community engagement; 4) equitable labor practices; 5) equity-promoting investments; and 6) investment transparency/accountability.

Our primary data source was the Recovery Plan Performance Reports (2021–2024), submitted annually by large cities and counties with populations over 250,000 to the U.S. Treasury. We also used the Treasury Project and Expenditure Reports (2022–2024) for descriptions of specific projects and spending to date. For jurisdictions not required to file reports, we relied on secondary sources such as city council minutes, municipal websites, and local media coverage.

**Jurisdictions with Treasury Reports:** King County, Pierce County, Snohomish County, Spokane County, and Yakima County

**Jurisdictions without Treasury Reports:** Spokane (city), Tacoma, Yakima (city), Chelan County, Port Angeles, Grays Harbor County, Franklin County, Mabton, and Kenmore

## Specific Assessment Methods by Section

- *Equity tools and institutional infrastructure:* For the jurisdictions without performance reports and where we learned about institutional equity infrastructure through the course of our qualitative research or outreach, we included that knowledge into the assessment.
- *Equity-promoting investments:* To capture the breadth of investments that were potentially equity-promoting, we reviewed the project descriptions of each jurisdiction's ARPA investments in the expenditure reports and assigned them to one or more of 14 equitable investment areas (up to three investment areas per investment) as well as up to three investment strategies within the investment area (there were a total of 106 investment strategies).

**Table 1. Washington Jurisdictions Analyzed**

Jurisdiction	Total ARPA Award	Population	Race/Ethnicity		Household Median Income	Persons Below Poverty Line
<u>King County</u>	\$437,576,495	2,271,000	White	52.1%	191,347,650	
			Black	6.6%	39,569,312	
			Native	0.4%	1,733,272	
			Asian	20.7%	19,769,752	\$120,824
			Islander	0.8%	592,077	
			Other	0.6%	1,949,065	
			Two+	7.7%	14,813,501	
			Hispanic	11.1%	n/a	
<u>Pierce County</u>	\$175,781,756	928,696	White	60.5%	562,111	
			Black	6.8%	63,178	
			Native	0.5%	4,498	
			Asian	6.8%	62,832	\$98,174
			Islander	1.6%	14,523	
			Other	0.6%	5,226	
			Two+	10.2%	94,808	
			Hispanic	13.1%	121,520	

Jurisdiction	Total ARPA Award	Population	Race/Ethnicity		Household Median Income	Persons Below Poverty Line
<u>Snohomish County</u>	\$159,679,985	844,761	White	61%	515,092	
			Black	3.8%	31,876	
			Native	0.7%	5,644	
			Asian	14.6%	122,894	\$106,269
			Islander	0.6%	4,676	
			Other	0.6%	4,764	
			Two+	6.6%	55,686	
<u>Spokane County</u>	\$101,547,383	551,455	Hispanic	12.3%	104,129	
			White	80.5%	443,620	
			Black	2.1%	11,640	
			Native	0.7%	4,052	
			Asian	2.3%	12,390	\$73,583
			Islander	0.8%	4,145	
			Other	0.6%	3,251	
			Two+	5.8%	32,075	
			Hispanic	7.3%	40,282	

Jurisdiction	Total ARPA Award	Population	Race/Ethnicity		Household Median Income	Persons Below Poverty Line
<u>City of Spokane</u>	\$80,991,104	229,447	White	78.7%	180,489	
			Black	2.7%*	6,255	
			Native	0.8%*	1,872	
			Asian	3%*	6,833	\$65,016
			Islander	0.4%*	794	
			Other	0.4%*	884	
			Two+	6.1%*	13,944	
<u>Tacoma</u>	\$60,969,952	222,906	Hispanic	8%*	18,380	
			White	54.8%	122,258	
			Black	8.7%*	19,342	
			Native	0.5%*	1,173	
			Asian	9.2%*	20,490	\$89,107
			Islander	0.7%*	1,598	
			Other	0.5%*	1,195	
			Two+	10.7%*	23,900	
			Hispanic	14.8%*	32,976	

\* Margin of error at least 10 percent of total value.

Jurisdiction	Total ARPA Award	Population	Race/Ethnicity		Household Median Income	Persons Below Poverty Line
<u>Yakima County</u>	\$48,729,139	256,643	White	38.9%	99,895	
			Black	0.6%	1,503	
			Native	2.6%	6,717	
			Asian	1.1%	2,715	\$69,525
			Islander	0.1%	297	
			Other	0.6%	1,485	
			Two+	3.1%	8,028	
<u>City of Yakima</u>	\$26,195,479	98,650	Hispanic	0%	0	
			White	44%	42,514	
			Black	1.2%*	1,175	
			Native	1.5%*	1,413	
			Asian	1.7%*	1,656	\$61,776
			Islander	0%	0	
			Other	0.3%*	286	
			Two+	3.1%*	3,029	
			Hispanic	48.2%	46,666	

\* Margin of error at least 10 percent of total value.

Jurisdiction	Total ARPA Award	Population	Race/Ethnicity		Household Median Income	Persons Below Poverty Line
<i><u>Franklin County</u></i>	\$18,495,757	99,034	White	37.2%	36,804	
			Black	2.1%	2,115	
			Native	0.1%	100	
			Asian	1.9%	1,921	
			Islander	0%	0	\$84,366
			Other	0.3%	281	13.5%
			Two+	2.8%	2,751	
<i><u>Chelan County</u></i>	\$14,995,195	79,997	Hispanic	55.6%	55,062	
			White	64.7%	51,774	
			Black	0.6%	449	
			Native	0.8%	634	
			Asian	1%	762	
			Islander	0.2%	167	\$76,722
			Other	0.4%	292	8.8%
			Two+	3.2%	2,549	
			Hispanic	29.2%	23,370	

Jurisdiction	Total ARPA Award	Population	Race/Ethnicity		Household Median Income	Persons Below Poverty Line
<u>Grays Harbor County</u>	\$14,579,719	77,290	White	76.2%	59,262	
			Black	1.8%	1,392	
			Native	4.3%	3,298	
			Asian	1.4%	1,051	
			Islander	0.3%	194	
			Other	0.2%	113	
			Two+	4.1%	3,170	
<u>Kenmore</u>	\$6,400,000	24,166	Hispanic	11.4%	8,810	
			White	64.3%	15,160	
			Black	3%*	714	
			Native	0.2%*	37	
			Asian	14.7%*	3,473	
			Islander	0%*	2	
			Other	0.9%*	217	
			Two+	6.2%*	1,472	
			Hispanic	10.7%*	2,519	

\* Margin of error at least 10 percent of total value.

Jurisdiction	Total ARPA Award	Population	Race/Ethnicity		Household Median Income	Persons Below Poverty Line
<u>Port Angeles</u>	\$5,652,400	20,000	White	80.9%	16,241	
			Black	1%*	197	
			Native	1.9%*	379	
			Asian	0.9%*	185	\$61,640
			Islander	0%	0	
			Other	0.2%*	36	
			Two+	7%*	1,400	
<u>Mabton</u>	\$633,726	1,943	Hispanic	0%	0	
			White	2.2%*	54	
			Black	0%	0	
			Native	0%	0	
			Asian	2.1%*	52	\$54,722
			Islander	0%	0	
			Other	0%	0	
			Two+	0%	0	
			Hispanic	95.7%	2,375	

\* Margin of error at least 10 percent of total value.

**Table 2. ARPA Equity Assessment Tool**

Overall Equity Focus (Questions 1-3)		
1	<b>Equity Conscious</b>	The jurisdiction demonstrated equity awareness by acknowledging the inequitable impacts of the pandemic and the importance of prioritizing funding to groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and systemic inequities, and ensuring equitable access to services/distribution of resources.
2	<b>Race Conscious</b>	The jurisdiction demonstrated race-consciousness by describing how Black, Latinx, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American and other communities of color were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and/or systemic inequities.
3	<b>Equity as a Priority</b>	The jurisdiction identified equity as a priority.
Equity Decision-Making Tools and Resources (Questions 4-11)		
4	<b>Equity Principles</b>	The jurisdiction described using equity-focused principles or goals to guide their spending plans.
5	<b>Equity Policies</b>	The report references jurisdiction-wide equity policies—either ordinances or resolutions—that support efforts to dismantle systemic racism and/or center equity in policymaking.
6	<b>Equity Framework</b>	The jurisdiction uses or plans to use an equity framework that provides a vision, approach/plan, and a set of actionable strategies to inform their ARPA investments.
7	<b>Equity Staff</b>	The jurisdiction has equity offices and/or staff positions dedicated to equity.
8	<b>Equity Tools</b>	The jurisdiction uses or plans to use equity tools to prioritize projects or funding decisions.
9	<b>Data Disaggregation</b>	The jurisdiction uses or plans to use data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and other demographics to understand inequities and guide their decision-making.

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10	<b>Geographic Targeting Via QCTs</b>	The jurisdiction is targeting or plans to target qualified census tracts (QCTs) in allocating resources. QCTs are census tracts where at least half of households have lower incomes than most of the surrounding region.
11	<b>Neighborhood Risk/Vulnerability Mapping</b>	The jurisdiction uses or plans to use other geographic targeting to disinvested/marginalized/vulnerable neighborhoods in allocating resources.

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### Community Engagement (Questions 12–14)

12	<b>Broad Community Engagement</b>	The jurisdiction engaged residents in deliberations on how to use the funds through mechanisms such as conducting surveys, workshops, listening sessions, participatory budgeting, community-submitted/generated project proposals, or other forms of engagement.
13	<b>Targeted Outreach</b>	The jurisdiction conducted targeted outreach to engage communities most impacted by the pandemic and systemic inequities.
14	<b>Inclusive Community Engagement</b>	The jurisdiction made its community engagement activities accessible through provision of translation services, childcare, location, and timing of workshops.

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### Equitable Labor Practices (Questions 15–19)

15	<b>Targeted or Local Hiring</b>	The jurisdiction indicated that it will apply targeted or local hiring requirements to ARPA-supported projects.
16	<b>Living Wage</b>	The jurisdiction indicated that it will apply living wage requirements to ARPA-supported projects.
17	<b>Prevailing Wage</b>	The jurisdiction indicated that it will apply prevailing wage requirements to ARPA-supported projects.
18	<b>Project Labor Agreement</b>	The jurisdiction indicated that it will apply Project Labor Agreement (PLA) requirements to ARPA-supported projects.
19	<b>Community Benefits Agreements</b>	The jurisdiction indicated that it will apply Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) requirements to ARPA-supported projects.

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## Transparency & Accountability (Questions 37–40)

37	<b>Equity Outcomes</b>	The jurisdiction uses or plans to use disaggregated data to track equity outcomes related to the ARPA investment.
38	<b>Public Data</b>	The jurisdiction committed to making data on ARPA investments and progress toward outcomes publicly accessible via a website/dashboard.
39	<b>ARPA Website</b>	The jurisdiction has or is planning to have a dedicated website or space on an existing web page for ARPA resources.
40	<b>Performance Measures</b>	The jurisdiction sets and tracks progress toward performance measures that include equity targets and disaggregated data for some or all of its investments.

**Table 3. ARPA Equity Assessment Results**

Jurisdiction	Equity Focus	Equity Decision-Making Tools and Resources	Community Engagement	Equitable Labor Practices	Equity Investments	Transparency and Accountability	Overall Equity Focus
Pierce County	High	High	High	Middle	High	High	High
King County	High	High	High	Middle	High	Middle	High
Snohomish County	High	High	High	Middle	High	High	High
Spokane County	Middle	Low	Middle	Low	High	High	High
City of Spokane	Low	Low	Low	Low	Middle	Low	High
Tacoma	Low	Low	Low	Low	High	Low	High
Yakima County	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Middle
City of Yakima	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Middle
Chelan County	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Middle
Port Angeles	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Middle
Kenmore	Low	Low	Middle	Low	NA	Low	Low
Grays Harbor County	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Franklin County	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Mabton	Low	Low	Low	Low	NA	Low	Low

**Table 4. Notable Equity Infrastructure**

Jurisdiction	Equity Policies	Equity Tools	Equity Office or Staff
<b>Pierce County</b>	Passed two <u>equity resolutions</u> committing to people-first policy decision-making (2021)	Countywide <u>Equity Index</u> and <u>Equity Note</u>	Community Engagement Coordinator (liaison on equity issues) + 2 Data Analysts that support the equity note
<b>King County</b>	Equity & Social Justice Initiative; <u>declared</u> racism a public health crisis (2020)	Equity Impact Review Tool, Social & Economic Risk Index (SERI), OESJ maps/dashboards, Determinants of Equity Report, ESJ Strategic Plan, Pro-Equity Contracting order	Office of Recovery & Resilience, <u>Office of Social Justice</u>
<b>Snohomish County</b>		<u>Determinants of Equity Tool</u>	Office of Recovery & Resilience, <u>Office of Social Justice</u>
<b>City of Spokane</b>			Manager of Equity & Inclusion Initiatives and <u>Equity Subcommittee</u>
<b>Tacoma</b>	The Office of Equity and Human Rights was codified into the Tacoma Municipal Code with <u>Ordinance 28866</u> (2022)	<u>Tacoma Equity Index</u>	<u>Office of Equity and Human Rights</u>
<b>Kenmore</b>	Adopted <u>DEIA policy</u> (2022)		<u>Assistant to City Manager /DEIA Coordinator</u>

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